

ALLISON ATWILL

Baizhang's Fox, 2011

Acrylic on birch panel with silver and copper leaf,
30 x 40 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

DAN WHITE

Wild Victorian Ladies

Women Campers a Century before Cheryl Strayed

Back in 2008, I was in Portland, Oregon, on a book tour to support a memoir I'd published about walking all 2,650 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail across California, Oregon, and Washington. My talk was set to begin at seven o'clock sharp, and I was getting self-conscious and twitchy because there were forty seats and only ten people. I hid behind a row of books in the children's section and watched the bookstore staff circulating through the aisles, rounding people up and practically shoving them into those folding chairs.

Just before seven, fifteen more people sat down. Two of them drew my special attention: a stringy-haired teen who sat in the center of the third row, only to bury his face in a manga book with an ultraviolet cover; and an athletic blonde woman who appeared to be in her early thirties. She was wearing, if memory serves, a Polartec-type dark fleece zip-up jacket. I enjoy honing in on people at my readings and guessing their occupations to amuse myself and ease my nervousness. By the time my talk was over, it was clear this woman had a sense of stillness and watchfulness, and a talent for deep listening. She was most definitely a psychoanalyst or animal trainer.

After the talk, she waited in line to have me sign her copy of my book.

"So ... you live and work around here?" I asked her, eager to test my guess about her occupation.

"Yes," she said. "In Portland." She mentioned her husband and two young children.

"What's your job?"

"I'm a writer."

"Cool. Part-time?"

"Full-time."

"Really? *So cool.* What's your husband's job?"

"Independent filmmaker."

"Oh my goodness. And you can survive on an author's salary and a filmmaker's salary?"

"So far," she said. "We keep our costs down."

"Nice. What's your name?"

"Cheryl Strayed," she said.

"Really?" I said, because she looked nothing like the pale and stringy-haired vision I conjured from her essays, which mentioned hard living and drug experimentation. I told her this. "You're not what I expected."